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## Review of Bremer and Haneke's "Zeugen für Gott. Glauben in kommunistischer Zeit."

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***Zeugen für Gott. Glauben in kommunistischer Zeit.*, 2 vols. Edited by Thomas Bremer and Burkhard Haneke. Münster: Aschendorf Verlag, 2014- 2015. 276 pp. and 286 pp. respectively. ISBN 340213070 and 340213084 respectively.**

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These two volumes (trans. *Witnesses for God: Belief in the Communist Era*) are devoted to the persecution of and discrimination against believers, predominantly Christians, under communist rule in 20th century Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The publication proves how little we know about our fellow believers who for decades lived under communist rule, and highlights what a huge field of almost untapped research has been opened up by the editors. For this, they deserve praise.

The two volumes contain 33 biographical sketches of “witnesses of God”, men and women, focusing on persecution or discrimination on religious grounds. There are some more or less prominent “witnesses for God”, but most are almost or completely unknown. The editors correctly point out that the vast majority of victims we do not know by name and perhaps will never know. In addition to the biographies of individual persons, there are a number of short essays on various topics such as the destruction and closing of monasteries in Moldova and of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine.

Thomas Bremer provides an introductory chapter on persecution of churches and believers under communism in general, focusing on the ideological and juridical framework of church-state /communist party relations. The intention of the editors and authors was obviously to portray a large variety of human destinies in order to prove that many very different people suffered, and that they reacted in different ways. For many people, persecution strengthened rather than weakened their faith. They did not quarrel with God; rather, they often reproached their own church hierarchy because of its opportunistic and weak stance vis-à-vis communist authorities.

These volumes contain examples of persecution from all East European countries under communism, albeit unevenly. Czechoslovakia, for example, is rather overrepresented; Poland and, strangely enough, the Soviet Union are underrepresented. Orthodox and Catholic churches are at center stage; Evangelical Christians-Baptists, for example, the most repressed denomination in the Soviet Union

in the decades after Stalin, are not documented at all. The explanation for this unevenness can be traced to Renovabis, a solidarity initiative of German Catholics founded in 1993, which provides support for churches and societies in former communist countries. Since Renovabis sponsored the publication, the idea was to represent all countries where Renovabis is providing relief and support today.

Albania and the GDR represent the extreme cases in the conflicts between religion and communism. Whereas in Albania during the era of Enver Hoxha all religious organizations were prohibited by law, in the GDR there was discrimination but no persecution of believers comparable to the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. The wide difference of relations between communism and religion is documented by respective biographies ranging from Katholikos Khoren I Muradbekian of the Armenian Church, murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1938, to Dietmar Bartel from the GDR who had to serve a one year and ten month prison sentence because he refused to be conscripted.

Circumstances of life for the “witnesses for God” also depended largely on the specific period of time. Bad times were the years immediately after the revolution of 1917 and the 1930s in the Soviet Union, and after the Second World War in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. At no time were believers perceived by the communist authorities as normal members of society.

The editors did not have in mind to put together a martyrologium; they rather intended to document the wide range of discrimination and sufferings of believers because of their adherence to religion and lack of acceptance as normal members of society. The source materials for individual biographies are very diverse. There are interviews by the authors, memoirs, and official or juridical records; some biographies are based on journalistic or scholarly sources. Ivan Denev from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church offered his personal state security dossier as source material. Authors and editors had to deal with a wide range of languages including those rather exotic such as Albanian; all biographies are translated into German.

Churches under communist rule received a lot of public attention in the West until about 1990. There were special research institutes, literature and journals. The West was focused on institutions. However, how believers—as opposed to the hierarchy—coped with their fate, how similar or diverse the

situations were over time and in different countries, was not easy to evaluate from the outside. Inside communist countries, there were mainly lies and propaganda, including from the church hierarchies. After the fall of communism in some churches, systematic research started to evaluate the communist past—for example within the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. However, much remains to be done. The main topics should be discrimination and persecution, adaptation and secularization. Did communist persecution accelerate secularization or just the opposite? The publication of *Zeugen für Gott*—let's hope—will lead the way to further research.